



# U.S. House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary F. James Sensenbrenner, Jr., Chairman

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## News Advisory

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## **Sensenbrenner House Floor Statement on Voting Rights Act Extension**

WASHINGTON, D.C. – House Judiciary Committee Chairman F. James Sensenbrenner, Jr. (R-Wis.) delivered the following remarks during today’s House floor debate on H.R. 9, legislation that would extend the Voting Rights Act for 25 years:

“I rise in strong support of H.R. 9, the Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, and Coretta Scott King Voting Rights Act Reauthorization and Amendments Act of 2006. H.R. 9 amends and reauthorizes the Voting Rights Act for an additional 25 years, several provisions of which will expire on August 6, 2007 unless Congress acts to renew them. I was proud to lead Republican efforts to renew expiring provisions of the Voting Rights Act in 1982, and I am pleased to have authored this important legislation to do the same a quarter century later.

“The Voting Rights Act was enacted in 1965 to address our country’s ignoble history of racial discrimination and to ensure that the rights enunciated in the Constitution became a *practical reality for all* Americans. Since its 1965 enactment, the VRA has been reauthorized in 1970, 1975, 1982, and 1992, each time with strong bipartisan support.

“The right to vote is fundamental in our system of government, and the importance of voting rights is reflected by the fact that they are protected by five separate amendments to the Constitution, including the 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, and 26<sup>th</sup> Amendments. However, history reveals that certain States and localities have not always been faithful to the rights and protections guaranteed by the Constitution, and some have tried to disenfranchise African-American and other minority voters through means ranging from violence and intimidation to subtle changes in voting rules. As a result, many minorities were unable to fully participate in the political process for nearly a century after the end of the Civil War.

“The VRA has dramatically reduced these discriminatory practices and transformed our Nation’s electoral process and the makeup of our Federal, State, and local governments. Since its enactment, the VRA has been instrumental in remedying past injustices by ensuring

that States and jurisdictions with a history of discrimination address and correct these abuses and, in some instances, stop them from happening in the first place.

“Section 5 prohibits States with documented histories of racial discrimination in voting from changing election practices and processes without first submitting the changes to the Department of Justice or the District Court for the District of Columbia. Section 5 has helped ensure minority citizens in these covered jurisdictions have an equal opportunity to participate in the political process. As a result of Section 5 and other provisions of the VRA, minority participation in elections as well as the number of minorities serving in elected positions has increased significantly and many of the Members here today are personal embodiments of those changes.

“Last summer, I, along with Judiciary Committee Ranking Member Conyers and Congressional Black Caucus Chairman Watt, pledged to have the VRA’s temporary provisions reauthorized for an additional 25 years. Over the last seven months, the Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution examined the VRA in great detail, focusing on those provisions set to expire in 2007.

“In addition to gathering evidence of ongoing discriminatory conduct, the Subcommittee examined the impact two Supreme Court decisions, *Bossier II* and *Georgia v. Ashcroft*, have had on Section 5's ability to protect minorities from discriminatory voting changes, particularly in State and Congressional redistricting initiatives.

“Based on the Committee’s record, H.R. 9 includes language that makes clear that a voting rule change motivated by *any* discriminatory purpose cannot be precleared, and clarifies that the purpose of the preclearance requirements is to protect the ability of minority citizens to elect their preferred candidates of choice. These changes restore Section 5 to its original purpose, enabling it to better protect minority voters. In addition, H.R. 9 reauthorizes Section 203 for an additional 25 years ensuring that legal, tax-paying language-impaired citizens are assisted in exercising their right to vote.

“The Committee record that formed the basis for this legislation demonstrates that while the VRA has been successful in protecting minority voters who were historically disenfranchised in certain parts of the country, our work is not yet complete. Racial discrimination in the electoral process continues to exist and threatens to undermine the progress that has been made over the last 40 years.

“In fact, the extensive record of continued abuse compiled by the Committee over the last year echoes that which preceded congressional reauthorization of the VRA in 1982, and which led me to make the following observation during the Committee’s consideration of VRA reauthorization legislation then:

‘Testimony is quite clear that this Act . . . has been the most successful civil rights act that has ever been passed by the Congress of the United States . . . . The overwhelming preponderance of the testimony was that the Voting Rights Act has worked. It has provided the franchise to numerous people who were denied the right to vote for one reason or another.

It has provided a dramatic increase in the number of minority elected officials in covered jurisdictions. I think that very clearly demonstrates the need for an extension . . . . The hearings also very clearly showed that the creativity of the human mind is unlimited when it comes to proposing election law changes that are designed to prevent people from voting.’

“By extending the VRA for an additional 25 years, H.R. 9 ensures that the gains made by minorities are not jeopardized. Like the preceding reauthorization efforts, this bill has strong support from Republicans and Democrats alike, including that of Speaker Hastert and Minority Leader Pelosi. H.R. 9 is also supported by many prominent religious and civil rights organizations.

“Mr. Chairman, among the keepsakes of my public service that I most cherish is one of the signing pens President Ronald Reagan used when enacting the 1982 Voting Rights Amendments into law.

“When considering their vote on the legislation now before the House, I would urge my colleagues to reflect upon President Reagan’s eloquent remarks on that occasion: ‘Yes, there are differences over how to attain the equality we seek for all our people. And sometimes amidst all the overblown rhetoric, the differences tend to seem bigger than they are. *But actions speak louder than words.* This legislation proves our unbending commitment to voting rights. It also proves that differences can be settled in a spirit of good will and good faith. As I’ve said before, the right to vote is the *crown jewel of American liberties, and we will not see its luster diminished.* The legislation that I’m signing . . . demonstrates America’s commitment to preserving this essential right. I’m proud of the Congress for passing this legislation. I’m proud to be able to sign it.’

“Mr. Chairman, I am proud to stand here with my colleagues, as I did in 1982, to ensure that voting rights remain protected for an additional 25 years. Let Congress again make Congress proud by passing this historic and vital legislation without amendment.

“I reserve the balance of my time.”

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